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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 AMMAN 006526

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ECON](#) [EATD](#) [JO](#)

SUBJECT: IN MA'AN, GOJ TRIES TO CHANGE ATTITUDES

REF: A. AMMAN 5830

[B](#). AMMAN 5451

[C](#). AMMAN 470

[D](#). 04 AMMAN 9226

Classified By: CDA David Hale for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#). (C) SUMMARY: Two and a half years after a failed uprising left six persons dead, citizens of Jordan's southeastern transportation hub of Ma'an are still restive. This hardscrabble desert town is influenced both by surrounding tribes, and by the many who drifted in to town and away from tribal society. Some of these have found new purpose in strong salafist networks. Ma'an has acquired a reputation for unrest. Its role in the founding of the Hashemite monarchy has produced a belief among Ma'anis that they are particularly entitled to GOJ largesse, and a corresponding propensity to rise up when they feel they have been taken for granted by the government. Like many other East Bankers, Ma'anis view the rise to power of the Amman-based Palestinian merchant class, and the reduction of the state's role in Jordan's economy, as a betrayal of their birthright. These attitudes, however, are slowly starting to change, thanks in part to the influence of Ma'an's rapidly-expanding Al Hussein University. END SUMMARY.

A DISTINCT IDENTITY

[2](#). (C) Ma'an, which originated as a resting place on the Hajj route, is a crossroads town that entered the modern era as a stop on the Ottomans' Hijaz Railway, linking Istanbul with the Muslim holy city of Medina. In 1921, soon-to-be Emir Abdullah I, Jordan's first Hashemite ruler, disembarked from a train car with his retinue and temporarily set up court in Ma'an before moving north to Amman with the support of the southern tribes. These tribes - particularly the Huwaytat, who dominate the area surrounding Ma'an - would go on to form the backbone of Jordan's Arab Legion. While the tribes of the Ma'an region share some characteristics with those elsewhere in central and southern Jordan, they have unique songs, dances, and folklore and an intense independent streak. One former government minister noted to poloff, "Almost every boy in the Ma'an area receives a gun on his twelfth birthday and it becomes his most prized possession." A city long known for its Muslim piety (a result of the Hajj traffic), Ma'an maintains strong ties with Saudi Arabia, where many Huwaytat also live. (Note: Riyadh asserted a claim to the region for several decades, and rumors still circulate that the Saudi government pays subsidies to Ma'an-area sheikhs. End Note.)

[3](#). (C) Despite its historical link with the Hashemite monarchy, the unique character of Ma'an has contributed to its long-standing sense of detachment from the government in Amman. More recently, the city has earned a reputation for restlessness. In April 1989, there were serious riots in Ma'an over a 30 percent increase in fuel prices, demanded of Jordan as a condition of an IMF bailout. After the rioting spread to other cities, King Hussein decided to reopen Jordan's parliament after almost thirty years in abeyance. Operation Desert Fox spurred minor clashes in Ma'an in 1998, and Ma'an again erupted in November 2002, after police tried to interrogate a Ma'ani extremist in the aftermath of the assassination of USAID official Laurence Foley. The clashes between armed extremists and police left six people dead, including two police officers, and many others wounded. (Note: The extremist whose attempted arrest sparked the

riots, Muhammad Ahmed al-Shalabi aka Abu Sayyaf, was finally captured in September 2003 after a ten-month manhunt and is now on trial, along with his alleged accomplices, for their role in the violence - ref C. End Note.) When the GOJ recently announced fuel price hikes of 30% and more (ref B), many in Jordan's political classes predicted new unrest in Ma'an. So far, there has been no trouble in Ma'an or elsewhere in Jordan. This is due, we believe, to the Jordanian security services' careful preparations.

PERCEPTIONS OF BETRAYAL

14. (C) At first glance, Ma'an seems an unlikely breeding ground for discontent. A city of 100,000, Ma'an compares favorably with most Jordanian towns its size. The level of evident poverty is no worse than can be seen in any other Jordanian provincial city, and some of Ma'an's villas would not look out of place if transplanted to affluent West Amman. Poverty statistics confirm this impression: Ma'an governorate's rate is far from the worst in Jordan, and while GDP per capita is not as high as in many other governorates, that measure excludes income earned by Ma'anis staffing the GOJ civil service, the Jordanian Armed Forces (JAF), and security services outside of the governorate - much of which is transferred back to Ma'an, as the high-end villas show. Islam and tradition are still the most significant influences on the city's life, but women on the city streets do not seem more conservatively dressed than elsewhere in Jordan (outside of West Amman). Similarly, the hostility in Ma'an to Israel and the U.S. are certainly not unique in Jordan.

15. (C) The paradox of Ma'an, say professors at the city's al-Hussein University, is that the recent unrest in the city stems directly from Ma'anis' long-standing belief that the Hashemite regime owes them a special debt because of the surrounding tribes' supposedly central role in the foundation and survival of the monarchy. Throughout the history of Jordan, the regime and the southern tribes have, it is true, had an implicit bargain: the tribes were given government jobs and palace bribes in return for their support (occasionally armed, though in recent decades merely political) of the government and the royal family. However, the catalyst for Ma'an's more recent outbreaks of violence, say these professors, has been the perceived failure of the regime to keep its side of the bargain. The stagnation of the government sector, to which the GOJ is trying to add as few jobs as possible, and a slowdown in the trucking industry, which Ma'anis claim has not been the same since the 1991 Gulf War, have left Ma'anis feeling betrayed. Ma'anis also believe that their historical position of favor has been usurped, even in the south, by an Amman-based, Palestinian-dominated commercial elite. This belief has only been furthered by the GOJ's drive to privatize state-owned companies that previously hired disproportionately (given relative skill levels) from the south, and by the establishment of the Aqaba Special Economic Zone, which has moved the focus of development in the south away from Ma'an and whose leadership includes prominent West Amman Palestinian-Jordanians.

16. (C) Another factor in Ma'an's chronic discontent stems from the transient nature of much of its population. For many of those who have drifted into Ma'an over the past generation (for instance in the large trucking industry) town life has worked them loose from the tribal system, and from that system's controls on behavior and politics. Much as in Zarqa (ref D), some of these detribalized people have found a sort of surrogate extended family in the Islamic revival. In Ma'an, that revival has been heavily influenced by salafism, and by the wahabism of neighboring Saudi Arabia.

SOMEONE ELSE'S FAULT

17. (C) Anger and mistrust in Ma'an towards the

King's policies and advisors are everywhere apparent, reinforcing mistrust of Palestinian-Jordanians. A meeting between emboffs and the Ma'an Chamber of Commerce - which was arranged to discuss the health of the region's economy - briefly demonstrated this tension and how it is displaced onto convenient foreign scapegoats. Turning to economic subjects for the first time in the Chamber's hour-long diatribe on the alleged faults of U.S. foreign policy, a Chamber member noted that U.S. economic assistance was being diverted from "real Jordanian needs" to the bank accounts of technocrats in Amman, and that the U.S. was aware of, and therefore complicit in, this corruption. He was quickly cut off by another member, who stated that rumors of aid-related corruption were lies, spread by Israel to stop donor countries from giving assistance to Jordan. Heated intramural debate followed, ended only by the return of the conversation to the USG's alleged abuses and mistakes in Iraq.

BUYING THEM BACK

18. (C) It will be no easy task to shore up Ma'an's support for a monarchy that now emphasizes reform and openness, but the GOJ is certainly giving it a try. In the aftermath of the 2002 rioting (as well as a highly critical report published by Jordan's Center for Strategic Studies that blamed the government for its poor handling of that crisis), the GOJ seems to have decided to spare no expense where Ma'an is concerned. It is shoveling industrial development projects in the city's direction at the highest rate in decades (ref A), but the flagship of the GOJ program is clearly Ma'an's Al-Hussein University, the area's first and only institution of higher learning. The 5,000-student school, founded as a branch of Kerak-based Mu'ta University in 1996 and made independent only in 1999, was moved at the end of 2004 to a sparkling new JD 24 million (\$34 million) campus on the edge of town - the first of three stages in a planned JD 60 million (\$85 million) facility.

19. (SBU) The university, which plans to double its enrollment by 2008, is furiously training professors - drawn almost exclusively from the three southern provinces of Ma'an, Tafila, and Aqaba - at overseas universities, in addition to sending over 100 students every year on scholarship programs to study abroad. Offering heavily subsidized basic tuition to students overwhelmingly from the south, the university still finds that it must provide financial aid to a large percentage of its students - and the GOJ has given it the resources to do so. Given GOJ budget constraints, the amount of money poured into the university represents a clear commitment by the GOJ to promote change and development in Ma'an.

CHANGING THEIR OUTLOOK

10. (SBU) According to university administrators and professors, the school has already had a noticeable effect on the larger community. In contrast to the university's founding, when area residents protested against co-educational classes and viewed the university as a threat to their traditional culture, Al-Hussein University is now recognized as an integral part of Ma'an and most citizens see it as directly connected to their own interests. Mixed-gender classes no longer raise many eyebrows and tribal fathers who once saw no need for higher education for their daughters are now encouraging them to study at the university (roughly 65% of the students at al-Hussein are female). In 1994, only 3.4% of Ma'anis held bachelor's degrees, but this figure had increased to 10.3% by the end of 2003. Many of these recent college graduates are from low-income families, and could not have afforded to study elsewhere.

11. (SBU) In addition to changing the outlooks and attitudes of Ma'anis, the university is having an economic impact. Student spending is supporting new consumer businesses and the city is physically growing in the direction of the

university. While many southerners still resist looking for jobs outside the public sector, the school is producing graduates with information technology and other skills that are actually needed by private industry, and who may even start their own small businesses. In recognition of the currently limited job opportunities in the area, the university is trying to develop classes that will help students find employment in the few "bright spots" in the regional economic picture, including courses related to tourism, hotel management, mining, environmental engineering, and archaeology.

COMMENT

12. (C) Restive attitudes among Ma'anis reflect both historical aloofness toward outside regulation of their affairs, and a change in the needs of the monarchy and the GOJ. Loyal tribal troops from the area are no longer a priority need for the government as in earlier days, when the country faced threats from the forces of secular Arab nationalism; the newer GOJ priorities of growth, development, and reform are here to stay. Closing the gap between Ma'an and the GOJ will therefore be a challenge. As Jordan advances reforms, some conservative elements will be left behind -- unfortunately, sometimes concentrated in pockets like Ma'an. Despite significant levels of state spending and much intelligence work, the city is likely to remain a breeding ground for extremists.

HALE